

How farmers' protests in Europe and India share common ground

Farmers in both regions are fighting against urban bias in agricultural policies, and for a role in shaping a sustainable future for farming.

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Spanish farmers protest over price pressures, taxes and green regulation and grievances shared by farmers across Europe, at Paseo de la Castellana street in Madrid, Spain, on February 26, 2024. | Photo Credit: JUAN MEDINA

The current farmers' protest in Europe and the Indian farmers' protest in 2020-21 and now again in 2024 have several specific features that reveal their differences, but they have a major commonality—they represent the revolt by farmers against the urban bias

in agricultural governance in the industrialised West and the emerging economies of Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

The major difference between them is that the political orientation of the European farmers movement appears to be right-wing although that might change, as it happens sometimes during the progress of movements. In contrast, the Indian farmers have marshalled amazing strength to push back against the right-wing authoritarian Hindu nationalist government agenda of centralisation of power and the handing over of control of food production, transportation, and retail to their chosen agro-business corporations.

The Indian farmers were supported by the political formations of the Left and centrist parties in 2020-21 and are being similarly supported now in their demand for the implementation of the agreement the BJP government reached with the farmers, especially the demand for a legally guaranteed Minimum Support Price for all crops. Despite this support, the Indian farmers acted autonomously and did not allow any political party to influence their decision making. They succeeded in 2021 in forcing the government to withdraw the flawed pro-agribusiness farming laws and are responding bravely to the repression let loose on them in 2024.

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In contrast with the anti-right stance of the Indian farmers, the farmers' protests in Europe appear to be vulnerable to being hijacked by right-wing parties which are opposed to green transition measures. The opposition of the right-wing parties to the decarbonisation of economies as part of the green transition is a combination of their ignorance of the seriousness of the threat of global climate change and cheap populism to make short-term political gains by appearing to support sections of the population that are adversely affected by badly formulated green transition measures. It will be a test of the political maturity of European farmers' organisations to see whether they too

will act autonomously and be able to thwart the right-wing infiltration in their ranks and decision-making.

Despite this apparent difference in the political orientation of the Indian farmers' movement and the European farmers' movement, there is a deeper commonality between the two. They both represent the simmering discontentment against the urban bias in agricultural policies, which has been building up and has finally erupted.

The first tractors arrive in the European Quarter during a protest of farmers outside a meeting of EU agriculture ministers in Brussels, on February 26, 2024. European Union agriculture ministers meet in Brussels to discuss rapid and structural responses to the crisis situation facing the agricultural sector. | Photo Credit: SYLVAIN PLAZY

The four main sources of the emergence of urban bias in management of agriculture can be identified as: a flawed and ecologically uninformed theory of economic growth; the capture of agriculture management by urban-based policy planners who lack a grounded understanding of the complexities of farming; the gradual decline in the importance of agricultural economics and agricultural economists; and the absence of farmers in policy planning, most crucially in agriculture.

That every country needs economic growth to improve upon the standard of living of its citizens was an accepted axiom of economic theory right until a few decades ago when ecologically aware economists started pointing out that this vision of continuously increasing economic growth is flawed because if economic growth crosses ecological boundaries, it would become counterproductive and dangerous to all living beings—human and non-human. The obsession with continuous economic growth argued for industrialisation because the application of technology to increase labour productivity did not have the same limits as there were in using land, a natural resource, for increasing agricultural production. Urbanisation accompanying industrialisation and the decline of agriculture were mistakenly celebrated.

This flawed paradigm of pro-industrialisation and pro-urbanisation was not confined only to capitalist economies. In the Soviet Union in the 1930s, the push for industrialisation and collectivisation of agriculture subservient to industrialisation led to brutal liquidation of farming communities. It showed how the so-called anti-capitalist path had imbibed and copied the capitalist path.

The flawed vision of economic growth centring on industrialisation has reinforced the urban bias in policy design by facilitating the capture of agricultural governance by experts and policy planners who do not have a grounded understanding of the everyday experience of farming. Since the decline of agriculture was viewed as expected and desirable, no need was felt for a robust understanding of the economics of farming. This manifested itself in the decline of agricultural economics as a subject in economics departments across the world. That there was a time when agricultural economists were highly reputable would appear to students studying economics in today's era of financialised capitalism as an unbelievable tale of ancient times.

Polish farmers block the A2 motorway to protest over price pressures, taxes and green regulation, grievances shared by farmers across Europe and against the import of agricultural produce and food products from Ukraine, close to the Polish-German border, near Swiecko, Poland on February 25, 2024. | Photo Credit: Lisi Niesner

The most glaring flaw of the urban bias in farming policies has been the absence of farmers in the formulation of these policies. Although managerialism in the education and health sectors—where educationists and health professionals are the ones least involved in framing education and health policies—has been creeping in with adverse consequences on both sectors, the consequences of farmers being absent from the framing of farming policies is gradually assuming shocking proportions. The resurgence of the farmers' movements is a telling reminder of the anti-farmer bias in farming policy.

That global climate change is a serious threat to our planet has been recently highlighted, with the EU's Copernicus Climate Change Service report that for the first time, global warming has exceeded 1.5C across an entire year. Agriculture has a key role in reducing carbon emissions to avert a climate catastrophe. To ensure that the sector performs that role, it is a strong imperative that no decarbonisation measures are forcibly imposed on the farming population.

Education, proper economic incentives to encourage decarbonisation, and full participation of the farmers in the making of farm policies should be considered a must for any green transition policy in agriculture. The time has come to put an end to urban bias in agricultural management, and the farmers movements worldwide are a wake-up call. Any attempt to repress these movements would undoubtedly strengthen right-wing authoritarian political tendencies, which will result in further weakening not only historically necessary green transition measures, but weaken and endanger the farming sector as a whole.

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The loud drone of farmers'
protest

Bengal's potato farmers
caught in a web of loans,
losses, and political
neglect
